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ORIGINAL REVIEW.

CLIO.

By James G. Percival. No. II. *Qui ne sait se borner ne peut jamais écrire.* B. LEECH. New Haven, 1822.

From the Preface to this volume of Poems, we expected to behold the brilliant and lofty productions of a great Genius, whose enthusiasm claiming affinity with *Byron*, *Milton*, and the superior Bards of creation, disdained a middle flight, in regions occupied by the meaner race of Poets, as Mr. Percival says, such as "Pope and Campbell." It is unfortunate for Mr. Percival, that he published a Preface to these trifles, and indulged in Criticism and Precepts, the former in violation of all taste, and received opinions, and the latter open to the strongest objections from truth, nature, and experience. "Pope and Campbell" never can be associated as Peers in the dominions of the Muses. The Translator of *Homér*, defies a parallel in the author of *Gertrude of Wyoming*! Pope occupies the highest station among English Bards.

Mr. Percival has undertaken to define Poetry, to describe a Poet, and illustrate his precepts by his own example. We are sorry he has not been more successful; for we deny that he has at all succeeded in his object. He does, to be sure, attempt to escape from the responsibility of critical disquisitions, by stating that he gives his remarks, "but as simple expressions of his own views and feelings." Still, in our opinion, they belong to the department of Criticism, and we can only consider this qualified expression, as a modest disavowal of arbitrary opinions.

Mr. Percival's definition of a Poet, and of Poetry, is deficient and erroneous, because it includes any eloquent writer, or piece of composition; it will comprehend the Orator, and the Oration, the Novelist, and the Novel. We shall quote his own words in proof of his error.

"I look upon Poetry as an art, whose charm lies in the exhibition of vivid imagery, new, varied, beautiful and sublime; and in appeals to the simple affections of the heart. The Poet, if we follow the etymology of the word, is a creator; one, who fashions from the stores of his memory, images, of which earth furnishes no reality; and who combines them into groups, which have an existence only in the imaginary world, he has charmed into being. He gives to his conceptions a visible form of beauty or of power, and animates them with a fire from heaven, beaming forth in their eyes and features, like the sweet flow of light from a lamp in a vase of alabaster; or flashing abroad, in the kindlings of emotion, like the fount, from which it was stolen. He takes you to the retirement of sensibility, and reveals to you all its nice and tender touches of character, and plays upon the springs, which call forth those feelings of happy sorrow, which move us in our sympathies with others, which are always delightful, because they seem to us holy, and are always welcomed, as the surest evidence, that nature is concealed within us. Every tear, that is shed then, is to us a treasure; for it flows from a fountain, in which, we imagine, angels might wash, and be purer. Even when he becomes the hierophant of nature, and leads us to contemplate the great principles of our being, when he is simply didactic, and his great object is the display of philosophic truth, he does not depart from his peculiar character. Every principle becomes with him a personification, and the great doctrines of science pass before him, as so many beings endowed with life and majesty and beauty."

The error of Mr. Percival lies in underrating measure and versification. Rhyme and metre are the essential and characteristic qualities of Poetry. Enthusiasm, genius, and imagination, may indulge in all their wanton creations in prose; and with the same effect as described by our bard in the above quotation. Thus Dr. Blair defines Poetry to be—"the language of passion, or of enlivened imagination, formed, most commonly, into regular numbers." Before Mr. Percival can become a Poet, he must acquire a proper and just idea of poetry.

There is frequently a contradiction between his own sentiments, in respect to Poetry. In one passage he tells us, "Nature is the charm of Poetry, and not art." He afterwards says, "a holy and inspired delirium, is the only test of true excellence in Poetry." Is Nature then, this delirium? No, assuredly not. But this inspired delirium is the charm of all Poetry; not wild and incoherent delirium, but enthusiasm, controlled and guided, and disciplined by Art. Poetry is fundamentally an Art; and the most bountifully gifted Enthusiast and Genius, would only create absurdities, if he depended on Nature, and threw off the beautiful fetters which give birth to immortal song, when the imagination is fired by that indefinable power, that we term Genius.

Mr. Percival again informs us, in another part of his preface, that "Poetic beauty is loveliest when least adorned." We confess we are staggered at this paradox. We cannot form a conception of Poetic beauty, without adornment. His meaning, in general, we are aware of, that Art without Genius, never can make a Poet. But this is no disparagement of Art. A man without fingers could not become an expert mechanic; but are tools and art, therefore to be estimated as worthless?

Mr. Percival is severe in his remarks on

mediocrity in poetry; and after unwillingly admitting the use of art, advises a return to nature, by which we understand in his own words, "the happy expression of natural feeling."—Now unfortunately, this happy expression of natural feeling may be prose and not Poetry, for it depends upon the genius and design of the author altogether, whether he makes this "happy expression of natural feeling," in the one, or the other. We venture to say, that Mr. Percival has not often succeeded in making it Poetry, for after all, his chief excellency is Art, and not enthusiasm, or Genius.

The Preface does the Poet no credit. It shows him not to have studied his art, and presents him in the character of a Critic ignorant of Criticism; which, if he had sufficiently studied it, would have saved him the disgrace of this chaotic jumble of false positions, and incoherent rhapsody. But as Mr. P. says, let us "pass from precept to example," and see how his fugitive pieces illustrate his canons of Criticism.

In these, we discover nothing above the mediocrity of descriptive trifles. Give him the name of Love, Melancholy, a spray of the ocean, a ray of the Sun, a beam of the Moon, a dew-drop, a rose, and the blossoms and verdure of spring; and you have furnished him out with all the materials of his poems. We were astonished to find a Poet so tenacious of "inspired delirium," so utterly passionless, and void of enlivened imagination. His first Sonnet, which occupies 8 pages, is wholly descriptive; and the same figures and imagery are repeated, even to satiety. In the first stanzas, he wishes to be *Cupid*, to be a *Butterfly*, to be "the guide of some rolling sphere." In the second stanza, he apostrophizes Evening; and throughout, the poem is but one mass of accumulated images, with no predominant thought, or reflection to give it elevation, and raise it above the unmeaning glitter of empty words. As Johnson says, it fills the ear more than the mind. The next piece is entitled a *Reverie*, and is of the same character.

I saw a neat white cottage by a rill,
And low'd the turf below, the sky aloft,
So softly green, so clearly, purely blue;
And as the mild wind, breathing odours, blew
Serenely through the grass tufts, and the crown
Of dandelions fill'd the fields with down,
Or some gay butterfly, on velvet wing,
Flitted around me, in the hearty glee
Of youth just bursting out of infancy,
And new'd with all the buoyancy of Spring;
I saw that neat white cottage, and I thought,
That was the shelter I so long had sought,
And there with one companion I might rest,
My weary head on humble quiet's breast;
And see the Year come forth, and dress her bowers,
And now in playful wandering, down the stream,
Follow its mazy bend, and in a dream
Of holy musing, on its banks of thyme
Reposing, listen to its simple chime
Through glossy pebbles, o'er nearly shells;
Thy watch is on the firmament—and there
Thou seest the hills of heaven in prospect lie,
As on the passing gale the light clouds fly,
And heave their fleecy folds, like curls of air,
So thin and so transparent is their veil;
Or dost thou mark some white-wing'd angel sail
Slowly athwart the moon-beam, shining through
Its spiritual form in every lovely hue?

The next is a Sonnet; and is still an edifice of mere imagery.

Winter is now around me, and the snow
Has thrown its mantle over herb, tree, flower;
The icicle has tapetried the bowers,
And in a crystal sheet the rivers flow:
And musing from the north, at evening, blow
The hollow winds, and through the star-lit hour,
Shake from the icy wood a rattling shower,
That tinkles on the glassy crust below;
And moving rises in a saffron glow,
Pouring her splendour through the fretted grove
In tufts, that round the heart enchantment throw,
Like what the Graces in their girle wave;
And shining on the moon's silken fostered brow,
That o'er the gilded landscape looks afar,
Her kindling beams the virgin mantle strow
With drops of gold, that twinkle like a star,
Dark maid of Yemen! from the tufted grove
Or date-trees, full in bloom, at sunset glowing,
And o'er the drifted sand their shadow throwing—
Maid of the flashing eye, that kindles love,
Go with me now to yonder myrtle bower,
That flings its perfume on the deep-green wave,
And gathering from the desert every flower,
Bind in their sweetest links thy willing slave—
Bring snowy rings from buds of coffee, twine
The myrtle and cassia round my offer'd arms,
Oh! let the red-rose blend its freshest charms,
And all its breathing odours now be thine—
Maid of the glossy brow, the swelling cheek
Clear as the juice, that ripens in the rind
Of Granadine, whose locks flow on the wind,
Like the light streaming clouds, that often streak
The pure sky of thy country—Maid! whose tone
Tells of a heart that beats with keener thrill,
Whose glances burn, like serpent eyes, that kill!

In the following magnificent glitter of similes, there is but one poor, trite thought, conveyed at the conclusion.

Fair, as the first blown rose—but Oh! as fleeting,
Soft, as the down upon a cygnet's breast,
Sweet, as the air, when gales and flowers are meeting
Bright, as the jewel on a sultan's vest,
Dear, as the infant smiling when caress'd,
Mild, as the wind, at dawn in April, blowing,
Calm, as the innocent heart—And Oh! as blest,
Pure, as the spring from mountain granite flowing,
Gay, as the tulip in its star'd bed glowing,
As clouds, that curtain round the west at even,
O'er earth a canopy of glory throwing,
And heralding the radiant path to heaven,
Sweet, as the sound, when waves, in calm, retreat, creating
Roll back, in gurgling ripples, from the shore,
When in the curling billows still waters meet,
Clear, from the spout, the molten crystal pour;
Sweet, as at distance heard the cascade's roar,
Or ocean on the lone rock faintly dashing,
Or dashing thunders, when the storm is o'er,
And dim-seen lightnings far away are flashing;
Sweet, as when spring is garlanding the trees,
The birds in all the flush of life are singing,
And as the light leaves twinkle in the breeze,

The woods with melody and joy are ringing,
When beds of mint and flowering fields of clover
Are redolent of Nature's balmy store,
And the cool wind, from rivers, hurries o'er
And gathers sweets, that Hybla never bore.

Fair, as the cloudless moon o'er night presiding,
When earth, and sea, and air are hush'd and still,
Along the burning dome of nature riding,
Crowning with liquid blue rock and hill,
Pencilling with her silver beam the rill,
That o'er the wave-worn marble filling plays,
Sheathing with light the cascade at the mill,
And paving ocean with her tremulous rays,
Through the cloud's lids of dewy violets stealing,
And gemming, with clear drops, the mead and grove;
Such is the light, the native heart of feeling
Throws round the stainless object of his love.

To cite examples of mere physical description, however, would prove an endless task, for CLIO is composed of little else. The stringing of Metaphors together, however prettily, soon wears an intellectual reader; it may amuse girls and children for a time, but even children will tire of the repetition.—His best pieces, are his Songs on FREEDOM, in which the meanest poets acquit themselves well. The theme supplies all deficiencies of genius.—The poem entitled "VANITY OF VANITIES," occupies twenty pages, in which but one tolerable sentiment breaks through the glitter of accumulated imagery. THE BROKEN HEART, is a strain of pure delirium, not inspired. It begins with this puerility.

"He has gone to the land, where the dead are still,
And mute the song of gladness!"

THE CORAL GROVE contains no sentiment, passion, or opinion, being purely descriptive. We pass on to THE CALM AT SEA, where he pictures something extraordinary.

"The night is clear,
The sky is fair,
The wave is resting on the Ocean!"

And again in the next poem he begins,
The wave is resting on the Sea.

THE LUNATIC GIRL is a misnomer for the Lunatic Bard; for it beats the Spectre Boat, of Campbell, infinitely. We shall reserve this precious morsel for a more merry occasion. We pass over a great number of trifles, which it would be an abuse of Criticism to dwell on; to offer a few remarks upon the penury of ideas, that characterize these poems. The great art of Poetry is to combine thought, passion, and sentiment, with music and imagery; for as Dryden has said "Music is inarticulate Poetry;" and melody of metre without thought, is very little superior to Music. Mr. Percival has much excellence of what he most depreciates, harmony and skill of versification; and he is distinguished by the almost total absence of that, which he most admires, enthusiasm, genius, or as he calls it "inspired delirium."

Our opinion of Mr. Percival's powers are easily expressed, and we trust are justly and impartially formed. His imagination is brighter than it is fervid, and his power of language leads him to neglect, what is of more importance than melody or rhyme—we mean reflection and knowledge. The art of poetry is only useful, or pleasing, great and ennobling, as it adds beauty to truth, or gives embellishment to knowledge. Description of natural objects and scenery, is soon exhausted, and is the meanest department of poetry; it was carried to perfection in the first ages, by primeval Bards. American Poets are too much addicted to this, from the facility of its performance, and their lust of sudden reputation. We doubt, from the evidence before us, if Mr. Percival possesses any power of invention, beyond the composition of a Sonnet; and for his taste, we have but a very equivocal opinion of it. He obviously wants retirement, study, knowledge, and discipline. The affectation of Melancholy, which occasionally breaks through the poems, we suspect to be an imitation of Lord Byron; which every writer should avoid, who is not possessed of his genius.

The best poem in CLIO, No. II., is CARMEN SECULARE, written in the Spenserian stanza, and distinguished by more spirit, thought, and energy, than any other of his fugitive pieces. Here LIBERTY forms a prominent theme, and it appears to be a darling one with the author; a circumstance which has impressed us with a high opinion of his patriotism and public spirit. Let him cherish this, if he wishes to succeed, and pants to bear the Laurel on his brows. Let him cultivate the Spenserian stanza too, more than he has done; and we do not despair of his producing a work, at some future day, which will do honour to his country, and procure fame and profit to himself.—With the exception, however, of the *Carmen Seculare*, we dislike all the contents of this No. of CLIO; and are no better pleased with the conclusion, than we were with the commencement.

Mr. Percival is wholly unknown to us. We bear him rather good-will than unkind feelings; but moved exclusively by a desire to see our Poets do honour to their Country, in the eyes of invidious Europe, we would have them ripen and perfect their Genius, before they attempt the Press, and add more discreditable abortions to the numerous miscarriages, that have excited the sneers and ridicule of British malignity.—Let every American, when he is writing Poetry, recall to mind the faults and the fate, of the COLUMBIAN, and the BACKWOODSMAN. If after that, he contrives to write ill, let him desist.—We conclude, by advising our author, to study still further the motto which he has prefixed to his book from Boileau.

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